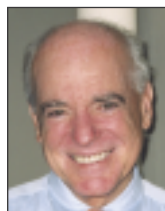


## Morale in Tough Times: It's About More Than Money



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**“D**r. Goldstein, Bobbi just sent me a text message, her mom is ill, and she had to take her to the ER. She'll call us when she knows what is happening. Also, I just got a call from Jean. You know, she was the patient who you consulted with last week about redoing her front teeth and was scheduled to begin her care on Thursday morning.

She said she was going to see her cousin, a dentist, for a second opinion and that she would get back to us. Also, there were 2 cancellations on the answering service for the hygiene schedule this morning. It seems like a number of our patients have the flu—and oh—there was some police action on the train this morning and Jessica will be a little late. I'm sorry doctor. I know this is a tough way to start the day!”

When you begin your day with a situation like the one described above (which actually happened to me on a bitterly cold January morning), any sane dentist's *morale* is tested. And as your morale goes, so goes that of your office.

### MORALE: WHAT IS IT?

The American Heritage dictionary defines *morale* as “the state of mind of a person or group as exhibited by confidence, cheerfulness, and discipline.” I would like to discuss how we can improve the morale in a typical dental office. I'm inclined to add the notion that this is a more difficult task in a period when so many of our patients are feeling the effects of the economic downturn. The mood or emotional tone that we often encounter these days is related to anxiety, frustration, and resignation.

Can we control something as *subjective* as morale? Sure, we can say to our staff, “Leave your personal issues at the door; *it's show time!*”, but in the real world can any of us truly do that? A sick child, babysitting issues, or an elderly parent who needs to be attended daily—a myriad of personal issues can and do weigh us down. Who *really knows* what goes on in the hearts and minds of our dental staff. We are not mind readers. Sometimes it is hard enough to get in touch with our own state of mind.

Our profession includes many dental consultants who will tell us what marketing plan to use, how to script conversations for improved case acceptance, or even teach us how to reduce our overhead; and no doubt, these are all important things for our practices. However, the assumption is that if we just improve our production, collection, and net profit—and then share the wealth via bonuses—the morale of the office will improve. In my opinion, prosperity alone does not ensure a high *esprit de corps*. Relationships among our staff and with our patients have a greater impact on morale than finances.

### MORALE: HOW CAN WE IMPROVE IT?

So what is the best way to ensure consistently high morale in our offices? I think it boils down to the following 6 important concepts.

### Character

In his February 2009 Coaches Reunion Workshop in Washington, DC, James Flaherty defined this notion in a beautiful and practical way. Mr. Flaherty is a leader in the profession of coaching and the head of New Ventures West, a coach training institute. According to him, *character* can be defined as *the observable and automatic ways we act, react, express, think, and feel that bring forth reactions from others and the world*. Here is the point: *our character* is the major determinant of the morale of those with whom we work. If you want to look for the key to the morale of your office, look to your own character. Look at how your team members react to you. Observe to see if the gifts that you offer—praise, gratitude, and appreciation—have been received. Then look, too, to the criticism you give, to see how that is received and the effect that this has on morale. If we consistently make positive offerings to our

*Morale is a function of small things—a look, a tone, an empathic nod, or just a feeling of openness....If you (the doctor), as the leader of your office, stay awake to the incredible impact that your character has on the morale of everyone around you, this positive aliveness that you engender can't help but be infectious.*

staff and make the necessary adjustments to ensure *that they have been received*, then the morale of your staff, the morale of your patients, and pretty much the morale of everyone you touch, will likely be positive. Listen to your team members. Sympathize/empathize with their reaction to an irate caller. Learn the value of saying, “Yes...yes...oh my goodness”—in other words, *listen* and do not sweep feelings under the rug. Bring flowers into the office on a regular basis. Do something sweet and goofy and self-effacing, like making fun of the mismatched socks that you wore one morning or the horrible tie you might be wearing now. Let your staff see that you may be an exacting professional, but you are also a real person. (They know it anyway!)

### Creating Community

This is one important way we can stay positive and upbeat, especially in the trying world in which we live. To create this sense of community, we start every single day with a morning meeting, commonly called a *huddle* in dental practice parlance. In addition to the most common agenda items for the huddle—the procedures that are

planned and the finances associated with them—our morning meeting becomes the place where we can briefly unpack (as is appropriate) what is weighing us down. Brevity is essential; this is *not* a therapy session. Team members don't need to be amateur psychologists, but they should be *excellent listeners*. This activity helps create and maintain a loving and empathic office. It is not easy, but it is crucial. It does require a high level of emotional intelligence on the part of the office leader. When staff members become sensitized to the role that personal feelings play in the office—and appreciate that among their job requirements is to love, respect, and support their co-workers—morale building becomes simply something that is routinely and self-consciously done every moment, a little like breathing. Sorry, I knew you were looking for some trick or magic formula to get everyone radiating joy. There is no silver bullet, only this piece of team-building work—*each and every morning*.

### The Enhanced Huddle

For over a decade, we have created a sense of community by extending the *huddle* in a way that gives everyone an opportunity to respond to the implied question, “How are you doing this morning?” Our format includes having a different staff member read the first paragraph or 2 from the lead article of the morning newspaper—a fresh copy of which is always in our waiting room each day. The point of this is to keep all of us informed about what is happening in the world. It makes us seem smarter and more prepared to converse with our patients. Our patients want to come to an office that is up on events and can better relate to them.

### Humor

Everyone in the office needs to feel warm, welcoming, and authentic by the time the first patient rings the doorbell. Besides doing the morning reading, the facilitator of our morning meeting is also responsible for telling a joke (an appropriate one, of course!). It is a big deal to smile or laugh before the first patient hits the door. We are kind to each other, and even if the joke bombs, we can laugh (gently) at the joke teller. I have been told over the years that this joke-telling feature is probably the best thing we do each morning to boost morale. By the way, the Internet is a great and unlimited source of humor.

### Initiatives

Create a sense of excitement by always having initiatives on the burner that will expand the practice. One example: a smile sale for Valentine's Day featuring a well-advertised discount on whitening and porcelain veneers. Another example: an appreciation initiative for Thanksgiving with enhanced hygiene services that include a discount on electric toothbrushes to clean off all the turkey and stuffing left on the teeth after the feast. With a little brainstorming, you and your creative team could easily imagine many other possibilities.

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